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After isolation of lockdown, zoo animals get to see six lakh humans in five months

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Bandra resident Rinka D'Monte recently took her son Abir to the Veermata Jijabai Bhosale Udyan and Zoo, popularly known as the Byculla zoo. The four-year-old was thrilled to see animals like leopards, tigers, sambar, hyenas, barking deer and Humboldt penguins at such close quarters. Rinka, an architect, and her son are among the six lakh people who visited the only botanical garden and zoo in the city in the five months since it reopened in November following the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The zoo was shut for a brief period in January 2022 owing to the third Covid-19 wave caused by the Omicron variant.

It reopened in the second week of February as Covid-19 cases began to fall. Data shows that in the five months since November, 59,0381 persons

visited the zoo and it earned a revenue of over Rs 2.3 crore.

The most visitors were in February, numbering 13,7176, while revenue earned was Rs 52,54,150.

Rinka recounts how she would take Abir to the zoo since the time he was in the pram. "We took him when he was nine months old in a pram. Back then there were very few animals and those like the elephant were also very far away in the enclosure and therefore my son did not enjoy them much. Now however the animals are much closer and Abir is able to see it vividly. Apart from it the gardens like the Zen garden, Japanese gardens also are very well done," she said.

Hutokshi Rustomfram and Shubhada Nikharge, trustees of the Save Rani Bagh Botanical Garden Foundation, who were integral to ensuring the footprint of the gardens remained as it is while the zoo was being upgraded, said that thousands visit the

botanical garden of Rani Bagh for the sheer pleasure of spending time in its sylvan surroundings.

“Adults and children can be seen enjoying the greenery, relaxing and playing in the many internal gardens. The overwhelming number of giant trees and the variety of flora, as also theme gardens like the butterfly garden, are a great draw for visitors all through the years, even at the height of the monsoon, not just in the present time but since inception 160 years ago,” said Rustomfram.

Dr Sanjay Tripathi, director of the zoo, said that very soon Veera, the cub of the Royal Bengal tiger pair Shakti and Karishma born in November, will also be there for public viewing. “Once her six-month vaccination course is completed, we will put her on public viewing also. Wild animals from cat families are given the anti-rabies course. Looking at the current scene, one can definitely say that visitor footfall has reached the pre-Covid levels. Last Sunday, for instance, we had 21,268 number of visitors with Rs 7.77 lakh revenue being earned. This is the highest one-day visitor count in five years. The last time the zoo saw more than these visitors, around 40,000, was in the year 2017 when the Humboldt penguins had been brought,” he said.

With the zoo being shut for a year during the pandemic, authorities had said that there had been a loss of Rs 5 crore.

A person wanting to visit the zoo pays Rs 50 currently per visit, though children are charged Rs 25. The facility is also visited in large numbers by groups of students who are brought for school picnics.

Civic activist Nikhil Desai points that while the animals are caged at the zoo, it is very important that the enclosure be designed in a manner that the animals be made to feel like they are in their natural environment. “Birds like the Humboldt penguins are a huge attraction, especially for kids, who may not be able to travel overseas to see these,” he said.

Officials said that ever since the reopening, there has been a lot more curiosity among visitors, especially as there have been three new additions to the zoo during the pandemic. These are the two penguin chicks that hatched, named Oscar and Oreo, and the tiger cub Veera.